

Turning out more teachers a concern for universities

By Madelynn Coldiron
Staff Writer

The retirement of a large number of baby boomer teachers in the coming years just adds to the pressure Marlene Helm already feels.

Helm, interim dean of the College of Education at Eastern Kentucky University, said an existing shortage of math, science and foreign language teachers, as well as minority teachers, will worsen as more teachers retire.

"We've got to figure out a way to make this better and improve these numbers," she said. "There are retirements on every end — it's not just going to be retirements in the K-12 world. It's going to be in postsecondary education as well."

In the last five years, ECU has graduated just a handful of new teachers in math, science, Spanish and special education. Between 2001 and 2005, there was not a single graduate certified to teach chemistry or physics.

"We've got to come up with some creative ways to get people in the pipeline that we need more of," she said.

Helm said one creative project will begin this summer at ECU, with a five-year sponsorship from Ashland Inc. "Try Teaching" will connect the human resource offices of major Kentucky corporations and the military with ECU's College of Education to identify retirees "who have a little itch or yearning or question mark about teaching," she said.

Some of those people, who would be looking for a second career, will be chosen for a two-week stay in the classroom with a master teacher. If they are qualified and interested in teaching after that, ECU will work with them to get a teaching degree.

Dr. Retta Poe, associate dean of Western Kentucky University's College of Education, said she believes that students will respond to the need for teachers when the time comes, pointing to the increase in students entering the special education program at WKU.

"We have already seen evidence that knowledge of the demand is already affecting the interest," she said. Poe said. One sticking point might be if teacher salaries are not increased, she added.

Poe said she thinks Western can increase its capacity to turn out more teachers if necessary, as long as it can hire the required faculty.